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WALL STREET JOURNAL
3 October 1984

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 28

Safeguarding America's Technology

By Ronald Bailey

"Techno-Bandits: How the Soviets are Stealing America's High-Tech Future" (Houghton Mifflin, 313 pages, $15.95) is a well-researched and detailed account of illicit Soviet efforts to acquire militarily significant American technologies. It presents a very disturbing picture that comes uncomfortably close to Lenin's prediction that, "The capitalists will sell us the rope with which we shall hang them." The authors (British journalists Linda Malvern, David Hebditch and Nick Anning) show conclusively that Soviet theft of American technology, particularly computer technology, increased markedly during the era of detente in the 1970s and continues apace in the 1980s. Aided by stolen American technology, the Soviet Union has been able to increase substantially the accuracy and effectiveness of many of its military's major weapons systems, especially its tactical and strategic nuclear missiles.

The cumbersome Soviet economic system, even after the intensive efforts of Soviet computer and electronics scientists in Zelenograd (Silicon City), has signally failed to keep abreast of Western, and particularly American, advances in defense-related electronics. Thus the Soviets have been very eager to obtain as much Western technology as possible. The favorite technique used by the "techno-bandits" to avoid U.S. licensing requirements is to ship equipment first to a neutral country, such as Switzerland or Austria, ostensibly for use in those countries, and then to send it along to Moscow.

Efforts to stem the flow of sensitive technology to the Soviet Union have been largely ineffective. The Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (Cocom) was established informally among the Western nations in 1950. Limping along on a tiny budget and taking action only upon the unanimous consent of the member nations, Cocom has only sporadically tried to enforce prohibitions against the export to communist countries of militarily important technologies. International commercial pressures often prevent Cocom member nations from agreeing on just what products should not be sold to the Soviet Union.

In addition, in the U.S., bureaucratic rivalries between the Commerce Department and U.S. Customs have hindered effective enforcement of U.S. laws prohibiting the export of technologically sensitive products to the Soviets. As a result, the Soviets have had no major problems acquiring the technology they need to keep up militarily with the NATO alliance.

As evidence, the authors recount a number of recent cases of technological espionage and illegal trade, including that of German businessman Richard Muller. Mr. Muller, referred to as "Mr. Millions" by his neighbors, through his network of 50 companies, most of which are based in South Africa or Switzerland, managed to sell the Soviets several VAX 11/780 computers that have strategic military applications.

An even more infamous techno-bandit is James Durward Harper Jr., a Silicon Valley engineer sentenced to life imprisonment in 1983 for selling secret information about the Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missile to Polish intelligence agents. But the strangest and most fascinating case is that of an American defector, Alfred Sarant. A friend of the Rosenbergs, Mr. Sarant disappeared shortly after their arrest. Known in the Soviet Union as Filipp Staros, Mr. Sarant was the chief architect of the Soviet Union's computer research center at Zelenograd and became the associate director general of research there.

The most disturbing question raised by "techno-banditry" is: How can we regulate the flow of technology to our adversaries while maintaining our principles of democracy and freedom of thought? Our electronics technologies are indeed vital to the West's defense, but the rapid technological progress that we have enjoyed is also dependent upon allowing our scientists and engineers free access to new research and discoveries. We risk stifling our technological growth by too-stringent government controls over the open dissemination of scientific information.

Neverthless, it should be possible to distinguish between technologies that are only militarily "useful" and those that are militarily "critical," as Ronald W. Schmitt, chairman of the National Science Board, suggested recently in Issues in Science and Technology. Our efforts to control the export of technology to the Soviet Union should be primarily focused on militarily critical technologies. Clearly stated guidelines for defining these must be developed through cooperative efforts by our scientific and defense establishments, and then strictly enforced. Additionally, Cocom must be strengthened and our allies must be more active in determining what will and will not be exported to the Soviet Union.

Our political leaders need to take effective action because, as the authors conclude, "The Communist East has been controlled by an aggressive tyranny for sixty years or so; to sell it the technology we have developed is to arm it even more dangerously against us. It is like the wagon train selling rifles to the Sioux."

Mr. Bailey is a writer living in New York.

Bookshelf

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